DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 247 077 RC 014 895

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TITLE Intermountain Community Learning and Information Centers Concept, Processes and Results.
PUB DATE Aug 84
NOTE 9p.; Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society (47th, College Station, TX, August 22-25, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Agency Cooperation; Community Education; *Cooperative Programs; Delivery Systems; *Educational Innovation; Higher Education; *Information Networks; Libraries; *Library Role; Program Development; *Regional Programs; Rural Areas; *Rural Education
IDENTIFIERS Colorado; Montana; Utah; Wyoming

ABSTRACT

Intermountain Community Learning and Information Centers are the result of work begun in 1977 by Utah State University and are based on use of rural libraries in a new information and education function. Support from the Western Rural Development Center permitted the Cooperative Extension Services, state libraries, and continuing educators from Colorado, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming to cooperatively work toward tying together information services (a traditional library role) with formal and informal educational services (a new role), thus forming a 1-stop community education/information center serving the multiplicity of rural needs. The delivery system is envisioned as using electronic access to informational resources, sharing educational resources through a multi-service network, and the training of specialists to market services to client groups. A multi-state survey of potential users revealed over 65% of the respondents had participated in some educational or training activity during 1981-1982. The first priority need was for Family and Human Relations information, with Professional, College Completion and General Community Enrichment among second priority needs. The project has created awareness of service needs in rural communities and in rural libraries, support has been sought from various organizations, and attention has been drawn to rural issues in two separate Congressional hearings on rural information needs. (BRR)

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INTERMOUNTAIN COMMUNITY LEARNING AND INFORMATION CENTERS

CONCEPT, PROCESSES AND RESULTS

A Presentation before the Rural Sociological Society
College Station, Texas
July 23, 1984

by

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RC014895

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INTERMOUNTAIN COMMUNITY LEARNING AND INFORMATION CENTERS: Concept, Processes and Results

A Presentation before the Rural Sociological Society annual meeting in College Station, Texas, August, 1984, by Glenn Wilde, Associate Dean for Extension and Life Span Learning, College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, UMC 07, Utah State University, Logan, Utah 84322

Introduction

I am pleased to be included as a presenter at this meeting of the Rural Sociological Society, especially this theme session on "Meeting the Information Needs of Rural Americans." Although I am not a sociologist by training or experience, I share a common concern with you about rural America. I grew up in a small Mormon village in northern Utah and from first-hand knowledge, I understand many of the problems confronted by young people who grow up and move out of rural areas. Furthermore, I share with many of you an Extension role--though my role is directed primarily to continuing education programs and activities than to Cooperative Extension research and services. Nevertheless, the project and processes I will describe today fit well with the goals of rural development and complement the Cooperative Extension thrusts for rural America.

In preparing my remarks for presentation, I have focussed on a descriptive approach; I realize that this may be hazardous, especially since the tendency, or perhaps the expectation, at professional meetings is to present and analyze research utilizing factor analysis, variance, and multiple regression techniques. This I will not do. My presentation will describe three elements of the Intermountain Community Learning and Information Center project: (1) the conceptual background leading to the community research and innovation; (2) the processes that the multi-state development team undertook, and (3) the results both in terms of the data generated and what local community leaders have accomplished since we initiated the project in 1980. To be candid, I hope to persuade members of the Rural Sociological Society to research the subject of information for rural America and to join with other public and private organizations, such as the American Society of Information Science (ASIS), to address the problems of rural information and education. As I have reviewed the literature, information needs and services for rural Americans represent a fertile ground for substantial research which has not been widely addressed by sociologists; this need exists not only for the professions but for raising the consciousness of the private sector technology vendors and information suppliers who tend to overlook or ignore the problems of the rural American.

I

The Conceptual Background

In the time remaining, I hope to establish the conceptual premises and processes we have followed leading to the development of the Intermountain Community Learning and Information Centers. First, I would like to focus on why we initiated the project. In 1977, Utah State University was attempting to develop an external degree for nontraditional learners in rural Utah so that they achieve educational goals without dramatically disrupting their employment or family. The greatest obstacle to this development was the issue of academic quality: simply stated, we could offer courses and a curriculum through traditional Extension delivery, but we could not offer the informational, library or learning resources necessary to support quality instruction or for self-directed learning. One potential solution, based on factors of institutional self-interest, was to strengthen the rural public library as a resource to serve our program needs. We had identified our need, but we were not concerned with the broader potentials of rural information or education delivery. This, from hindsight, was a myopic and extremely self-centered vision concerning rural needs, which we have since discovered.

Candidly, our inclination was to "go-it-alone," to seek funding to do this for Utah State University, but potential funding agencies, particularly one foundation, established, thankfully, hurdles: these agencies perceived that the problems of quality rural education and meaningful information were not unique to Utah but were problems inherent to rural America. We were encouraged to seek broader participation with other contiguous states whose rural residents confronted similar liabilities. Furthermore, we came to realize that we had not identified or consulted with the other "players" whose interests and mandated responsibilities could also be served and strengthened. With the support of the Western Rural Development Center, we brought together representatives from the Cooperative Extension Services, state libraries, and continuing education from Colorado, Montana, Utah and Wyoming to further mold the concept and form the strategies. This was not an easy task, for each organization had its own mandates and traditions.

As my colleague Betsy Peters of the University of Wyoming has written, "Bringing together the representatives from four states to define possible services and delivery systems presented both opportunities and problems. We felt we understood our own problems and that we had at least a general understanding of the problems of our neighboring states. We mutually wanted to utilize new communications technology to solve some problems of isolation and distance. We knew we needed a strong community support base, for programs superimposed from the top are rarely successful. These multi-state representatives were faced with the necessity of hammering out a concrete, workable plan to accommodate state needs, but also to serve multi-state interests. Basic strategies had to be defined; jurisdictional questions had to be

decided; and there was, to be honest, some concern with turf and wariness of our neighboring states. And there were some differences in approach among the four states." (ASIS Bulletin, June, 1984)

The common bonds, however, were the similarity of the shared needs among the states and the similarity of the physical and resource deterrents to address those needs. We recognized that we transcended boundaries and disciplines. In addition, we found other mavericks, such as Gerry Sorkin who at that time was assigned to the National Agricultural Library, who believed, as we came to believe, that it is the service to the user which is most important--not the organization or administrative structure. It is not how information gets to the users but whether it gets to them; and unfortunately, "turfdom" is a powerful, philosophical stumbling block to community innovation.

In a very simplistic nutshell, we conceptually agreed to work toward the development of the existing rural public library as a Intermountain Community Learning and Information Center--a new conception which tied together informational services (a traditional library role) with formal and informal educational services (a new role). The delivery system was based on electronic access to informational resources, the sharing of educational resources through a multi-state network, the multi-community delivery of educational services, and the training of a Community Information/Education Specialist to market the services to the client groups. Among the technologies to be configured were interactive audio and video instruction, electronic blackboards, slow-scan video, computer assisted instruction, and computer access to informational and educational databases; these technologies existed, but had never been configured for a single-site location--a one-stop community education/information center to better serve the multiplicity of rural needs.

The Western Rural Development Center provided resources to begin the necessary community research and development processes, which included:

1. Identification of potential community sites to explore the local support for the project, including such factors as the availability of space in the community library, the potential support of the community librarian and elected leaders, and the potential community growth related to factors of energy impact and development.

2. Preliminary, but formal, meetings with elected officials, community library boards, administrators of public schools, and other leaders of professional, civic and social groups to describe the concept and the other processes in order to gain approval and support.

3. Conducting a Community Interest Inventory (survey) to ascertain what user or potential users attitudes concerning the quality of current educational and information services were and what other services may be needed or desireable.

4. Multi-state meeting to discuss the information and community support, leading to implementation.

II

Some Findings

Now let me turn to some of the significant multi-state findings from our community research. We distributed an instrument to users or potential users in each of the target communities in the four states for appropriate response. Basically we wanted to get information from the respondents about (1) whether they had sought information and from what community sources they sought or gained information; (2) the respondents' perceptions about the quality of the educational/informational services available to them; and (3) what other services were necessary or desireable. In addition, we requested demographic information about the respondents.

Regionwide, over 60% of these community respondents indicated that they had sought information during the year. Furthermore, the respondents had sought information from a number of community sources, including the local library, county Extension offices, among other available local sources; some, as noted, sought information from a variety of community sources. Of those seeking information, over 50% of the respondents information had to seek it from sources external to the community. Even more significant, perhaps is that nearly one-third of these information seekers indicated that they had to leave their community to get the necessary information; we might infer that information has a value, especially since most, if not all, of the respondents would need to travel over three hours to a metropolitan or university center to get the information. We need to seek further research into what kinds of information they sought and whether, even after travel, the information was used, and in what ways it was used. Also, how do rural information seekers locate relevant information among the various state, federal or private repositories and how to they gain access to it if it is available?

The respondents also confirmed that there was broad participation in educational programs. During 1981-82, over 65% of the respondents indicated that they had participated in some educational or training activity--a larger number than we had anticipated. The respondents engaged in these planned activities from a variety of educational organizations. Some were offered in the community, but many required travel to metropolitan areas or colleges and universities. Even with these opportunities, most respondents desired additional educational programs and resources. The instrument allowed respondents to identify under broad categories the kinds of educational and/or training programs or services which they "would like to have available in their community."

From the written responses, a weighted listing was derived which represented multi-community, multi-state respondent needs for both information and education. The first priority among the respondents was in the area of Family and Human Relations; this surprised me, if not others, for I had anticipated that respondents would be more interested

in business and farm management, issues of health, among others we had categorized. Afterthought, however, has led us to one possible inference: each of these target communities had undergone stress and impact because of the rapid growth related to energy development; sociologists have substantiated such stress. Again, these are areas and opportunities for substantial research.

We established Priority II needs again using a weighted listing derived from the number of respondent requests. Among the Priority II requests for needed services were: Professional, College Completion and General Community Enrichment (ranging from adult basic education to graduate programs, computer literacy); Small Business Training and Management Assistance (management practices, accounting, innovation finance); Rural Health, Medical Education and Training (ranging from in-service for the professionals to self-help for individuals and family); and Legal and Law Enforcement (training for police, lawyers, and others in the community). Agricultural programs became a third priority; there were high levels of satisfaction about both information and programs for agriculture--certainly a complement to the Cooperative Extension Services in each of the states. Yet agriculture, by and large, has not contributed significantly in most of these communities to the recent growth; few respondents were in agriculture or agricultural-related businesses.

The Community Interest Inventory was only one method used to determine interest and feasibility: we have discussed one-on-one and in group sessions with community residents; we have held multi-state planning meetings with community representatives to identify barriers to rural education and information development. In a Denver planning meeting, the following barriers, identified by rural leaders, further established the need for an effective delivery system:

1. the lack of a delivery system and network to transfer educational or informational programs;

2. the lack of critical and cost-effective linkages among public and private educational and informational institutions, state libraries, and local communities;

3. the lack of a "critical mass" of learners in local communities to assure courses, programs and services for local residents;

4. the lack of technology transfer and local adoption of technologies; and,

5. the lack of training for effectively utilizing the technologies and resources and assisting in the local development of needed services.

Our focus has become the needs of the local community; our processes, though slightly different from state to state, emphasis the community identification of problems and needs and the local coordination of learning and information resources. In some communities, the Human Resource Council or a county-wide development council, often with the guiding support of the Extension or Community

Development Agent, has been established to address the concerns of education and information.

III

The Results

Without full implementation of the project, it is not wise to state that we have been successful; nevertheless, we have achieved some successes which we believe important:

1. We have created awareness within the community about service needs, and the community leadership has been responsive; on a recent site visit to the Utah and Colorado community sites with program administrator with a major foundation, the local governments have appropriated funds to renovate rooms or to build additions to community facilities to house the Community Learning and Information Centers; civic groups, library boards, professionals, and elected leaders succinctly and articulately addressed their community needs and have demonstrated their support. The innovation has established itself community-wide.

2. We have attempted to create awareness and enlist the support among library, continuing education, and information associations concerning the needs and issues of rural Americans. For example, the American Society for Information Science, an organization representing a broad base of public and private organizations and businesses, has encouraged the development of a Rural Special Interest Group (SIG) and enlists the support of other organizations and individuals to create the awareness of rural needs. In addition, we are working with the Education Committee of ASIS to gain certification for an academic program to certify a Community Information/Education Specialist, trained in the necessary information, community development, technology and marketing skills.

3. We have drawn attention to rural issues in two separate Congressional hearings on rural information needs. This, to limited extent, has supported the efforts and visions of sensitive information mavericks like Gerry Sophar to articulate rural strategies and facilitate organizations at the national level to assist rural service development. We provided a visible catalyst for the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science to establish a rural priority and to examine and evaluate rural needs; this has resulted in a purposeful joining of exploratory efforts between NCLIS and the USDA in working to establish NABRIN, providing additional thrusts for rural development.

4. At a rural information symposium sponsored by AGNET and the Congressional Research Service at the University of Nebraska, September, 1983, we presented the concepts for service delivery which was adopted by the discussant group as a model for services to rural America. (For further information, see Information Needs for Modern Agriculture: Symposium Proceedings, AGNET: University of Nebraska, 1983.)

IV

In concluding, I would like to read a comment from a resident in Wyoming (quoted by Betsy Peters); she writes, "As the computer age descends upon us and information becomes more available through sophisticated communications technologies, we are going to see situations where this new literacy is no just voluntary, but imperative to progress and success." We must cooperatively work to strengthen the resources to rural Americans. The rural library as a new information and education utility can become a continuing resource to serve rural Americans. We enlist your professional support.